Introduction.
Age and Gender: Aging in the Nineteenth Century

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This special issue of *Nineteenth Century Gender Studies* brings together two crucial aspects of identity formation and experience, age and gender, in order to consider the ways in which each may be mutually-informed. Both gender and categories of aging provoke similar questions about their own cultural construction, and the role of nature or biological determinacy. Literary, artistic and historical engagements with the social imperatives that sought to proscribe their nature and scope reveal much about the dynamic ways that both gender and age impacted on life and subjectivity across the century. As Kay Heath has argued, "To exclude the concept of age is not only to ignore, but also to deny, its pervasive influence on the way culture constructs our identity as humans and by such denial to remain unconscious of and therefore vulnerable to age's hegemonic intensity" (4). The consciousness of aging and its cultural influence, as it emerges across the texts, biographical accounts, and historical data under consideration here, consequently informs the construction and development of views on gender identities in the period. Literary and artistic depictions of gender suggest that an understanding of age becomes a point of potential identification and collective understanding for women and men across such categories as class and nation, race and sexuality. However, the processes of aging and the shifting cultural significance attached to each stage of life in this period highlight the tensions and anxieties which also accompany the gendered experiences of growing up and growing old. A critical consciousness of age therefore provides a suggestive means of understanding femininity and masculinity in nineteenth-century literature and culture. Constructions of age are also linked to the eroticization of bodies in nineteenth-century fiction – the beautiful youth is rendered desirable within a different erotic economy than the mature statesman, and performs a different narrative function – the same holds true for the nubile girl as opposed to the worn

spinster, for example. Conceptions of both age and gender are used familiarly in the Romantic and Victorian periods to define the boundaries between experiences of, for example, a domestic dependent and a social participant, but they can also serve to complicate societal notions of evolution, progress, and modernity. This special issue therefore provides a forum for enquiry into such debates.

The heavily-freighted figure of the child in nineteenth-century culture has received much critical attention, and the problematic and complex nuances of juvenile experience, or of adult investment in the idea of childhood, continue to offer remarkably fertile ground for scholarship. However, age, conceived more broadly on a spectrum from infancy to elderliness and senility, provides an oft-overlooked facet of identity construction. Rather than viewing age as a secondary, corollary aspect of individual (or collective) experience, recent developments in this fruitful area for research in Romantic and Victorian studies are testament to growing academic appreciation for the significance of cultural perceptions about aging throughout the nineteenth century. Age studies forms a compelling basis for new developments in literary-historical work, and as such is gaining momentum across several disciplines from the humanities and social sciences.

This special issue of *NCGS* addresses a range of gender issues through the lens of age studies, and vice versa. In doing so, such a dualistic approach highlights the complementary modes of study that each of these theoretical frameworks employ. Gender studies may be used as a paradigm for aging studies. Both age and gender are understood in terms of social construction and performance, and speak clearly to one another in the clarification and development of a pliable self-identity. As this collection of essays illustrates, both can be explored in relation to both subjection or marginalization and power or agency, and both are largely involved in the articulation of body image and representation (to include disability), as well as engaging closely in debates about sexuality, developments in education, medical

theories, and the political landscape of nineteenth-century Britain and her colonial outposts. However, their parallels are not always mutually conversant as, in the often rigid characteristics that determine life stages, aging in particular puts pressure on the stability of identity formation, including the self-perception of individual gender alignment and corresponding physical, mental or social features that are associated with either masculinity or femininity in the period. The occasions in literature and art in which such experience does become fractured provide further opportunity for considering the significance of both age and gender in the Romantic and Victorian periods. Like gendered experiences, and the performance of particular roles or resistance to gender scripts or ideologies, childhood, adolescence, midlife and old age are culturally and historically situated. Both gender and age together, then, can speak eloquently to the construction of selfhood throughout the nineteenth century (in addition to providing comparative opportunities for considering similar issues in our own society).

Take, for example, a representation of aged femininity by one of the most popular authors at mid-century, Charles Dickens. In *Dombey and Son*, Mrs. Skewton, Edith Dombey's scheming mother, emerges as an unnatural, monstrous old woman. She boldly resists the cultural narrative of decline that prescribes modesty and seclusion in accordance with her advanced years, choosing instead to perform a role that emulates that of femme fatale, and affecting juvenile simplicity, despite being over seventy:

> Mrs Skewton's maid appeared, according to custom, to prepare her gradually for night. At night, she should have been a skeleton, with dart and hour-glass, rather than a woman, this attendant; for her touch was as the touch of Death. The painted object shrivelled underneath her hand; the form collapsed, the hair dropped off, the arched dark eyebrows changed to scanty tufts of grey; the pale lips shrunk, the skin became cadaverous and loose; an old, worn, yellow, nodding woman, with red eyes, alone remained in Cleopatra's place, huddled up, like a slovenly bundle, in a greasy flannel gown. (423-424)

In this extract from *Dombey and Son*, the seventy-year-old Mrs Skewton's masquerade of twenty-something youthfulness is exposed by Dickens as an artificial performance which is at once humorous, grotesque, and obscene (as argued by Leah Grisham in her essay below). Mrs. "Cleopatra" Skewton is described as a "painted object" who, under the hands of her maid, is transformed from a poorly-renovated approximation of blooming beauty to reveal the skeletal, ghastly form that remains beneath the artful clothing and cosmetics. This embodiment of aged femininity is identified as a ghastly spectacle, yet it also emerges as an illustration of the plasticity of age through manipulation, as youth is, here, a performance. Dickens's account of Mrs. Skewton is certainly damning, although part of what is disclosed in this passage are the ravages of age on the woman's body – the physical manifestations of a process that has stripped her of her desirable feminine allure (the symbols of which are now only an impersonation). The reader is invited by Dickens to recoil at the yawning gap between the face that she elects to portray to the world, and the wrinkled 'cadaverous' frame that she actually possesses. Although the discrepancy is partly humorous, this description also speaks to the struggles of 'an old, worn yellow, nodding woman', vulnerable to the inescapable processes of decay and decrepitude attached to old age, powerless to fully reinvigorate herself but clinging still to a pathetic fantasy of girlish charm which she can no longer possess. This serves as an evocative demonstration of one way in which age was constructed in the nineteenth century, and its ability to impact on corresponding assumptions about gender performance. Despite the negative portrayal of Mrs. Skewton, Dickens's novel shows that age may be a matter of enactment and identification rather than necessarily essential and restricted to the linear confines of a sequential life course. Such issues of performance – in inhabiting age-determined identities and of subjectivity informed by discourses of gender – are raised by several of the articles in this number of *NCGS*.

As the work for this special issue has been underway, I have also been preparing an elective module for my university's English degree programme called "Growing Up and Growing Old: Youth and Age Across the Nineteenth Century". This has led me to reflect on the fairly youthful state of age- and aging studies, which itself was described as only just "coming of age" by Cynthia Port and Aagje Swinnen,[i] and which is a field steadily gaining ground within my discipline.[ii] In writing the module descriptor – which would effectively be used to advertise this course component to final-year undergraduate students – I found myself wondering what the uptake would be like. Although the British universities at which I have taught English literature have all had core theory modules, to include a number of weeks on popular critical theories, modes of interpretative analysis, and approaches to literature, age studies or literary/critical gerontology rarely make an appearance. This led to my uncertainty about the reception of a module in this area, as it illustrates the fact that the study of age, aging and the life course remains remarkably underrepresented on humanities degree programmes. I was therefore aware that prospective students for my module might not have considered in detail how, as part of their study of literature, 'age' emerges as a feature of cultural narrative and ideology, impacts on individual subjectivity and biography, or could be utilized as a means of marginalization in the same way that gender, race, or sexuality might.[iii]

Despite the study of identity and human experience residing at the heart of disciplines such as English and History, then, humanities subjects have been surprisingly slow to focus on the impact of aging on consciousness and subjectivity, and the ways in which attitudes about aging are embedded in dominant cultural norms and values.[iv] While the pressures of our demonstrably age-conscious culture today have meant that contemporary literature has received critical attention more persistently from age theorists, the consideration of age and aging in *nineteenth-century* literature and culture specifically has on the whole been less prominent in scholarship. There have been excellent, however, notable exceptions to this, and

sustained, significant, energizing work in this area has been conducted by theorists and critics such as Karen Chase Mike Featherstone, Margaret Morganroth Gullette, Kay Heath, Mike Hepworth, Devoney Looser, Helen Small, Pat Thane, and Kathleen Woodward – to name just a few whose area of study has been at least in part on the long nineteenth century. In 2014, too, Katharina Boehm, Anna Farkas and Anne-Julia Zwierlein produced an edited collection of essays on *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Aging in Nineteenth-Century Culture*. It is to be hoped that such materials, which lay an excellent foundation for continued scholarship in this area, engender further work; in part this is the project of this *NCGS* special issue, which contributes to the fields of both gender studies and age studies. The work of those listed above has done much to recoup age and aging as critical concerns for scholars of this period, thereby resituating age and reclaiming it from the margins. Age and aging are increasingly exposed to more systematic scholarly assessment and engagement in humanities-focused nineteenth-century studies, to complement the social and medical sciences which have been preoccupied with age and aging for much longer. Each of these essays here explores the ramifications of aging within this specific cultural and historical context.

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In editing this special issue it has been most encouraging to see such diverse responses to the topic, and the essays here provide new ways of understanding both gender and age through analysis of a number of genres, texts, discourses and approaches, ranging from the literary and the cultural, to the sociological and historical. Age is confirmed in this issue as both constitutive of identity and also disruptive. The essays included examine not only how age may be performed, or how it may be prescribed at various points within nineteenth-century culture, but also the difficulties that arise from inhabiting an age that does not coincide with one's chronological stage of life. The impact of such experiences of aging frequently emerges as a means of disturbing perceptions of gender, so that identifications of both masculinity and

femininity are fractured and distorted by age, as much as they are informed by gender-oriented assumptions about how age and aging are signified. Emergent tensions, for example over issues such as sexuality and erotic desire, longevity, cross-generational relationships, and what constitutes "appropriate" behavior, complicate further the dynamic intersections of gender and age.

In her essay, Melanie Zynel interprets Maria Edgeworth's novel *Belinda* as both a conventional courtship narrative, but also as a text which articulates a more complex engagement with aging femininity that emphasizes female friendship and queer attachment as recuperative. In focusing on the significance of the injury to Lady Delacour's breast, Zynel shows that rather than a form of punishment for her refusal to conform to social expectations (as an older woman, a wife, and a mother), Lady Delacour's illness provides an opportunity to explore the affective and potentially erotic ties between women that, in part, negate the seemingly heteronormative imperative embedded in the novel. In its disruption and deferral of the courtship plot, and of the drive towards marital harmony, *Belinda* disrupts the desirable banality of domesticity that such fiction often sought to idealize and maintain. Instead it proposes, as Zynel illustrates, alternative possibilities for the aging woman beyond the confines of domestic arrangements that sought to naturalize heteronormativity, and to equate the imperfect body with moral laxity and social nonconformity. While Lady Delcaour's wound and subsequent debilitation mark her refusal to conform to society's expectation that, as a married woman no longer "young", she ought to confine herself to proscribed behaviors, her illness also becomes the means of creating a newfound intimacy between women in the text; her physical defect operates not as a discordant physical and moral marker through which she is stigmatized, but functions to empower her and to reclaim the importance of female friendship and desire.

The anxiety about diminishing status resultant from growing old is also prominent in the essays by Abigail Boucher, Leah Grisham and myself. Fears about becoming socially irrelevant and sexually redundant arrest the female characters in *The Monk* and personified in both Mrs Skewton and Madame Walravens. In a fragment of text by George Meredith, too, a similar unease develops for the middle-aged protagonist Gilbert Pollingray, perturbed by the extent to which his age neutralizes his eligibility for marriage to a younger woman. Boucher's essay provides an enlightening analysis of Matthew Lewis's attitude towards the menopausal woman in his gothic novel *The Monk*, examined through the lens of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century medical perceptions of female midlife. She divides this experience into three distinct types – the Absurd, the Aggressive, and the Appropriate – to demonstrate how Lewis conceived the menopausal woman as grotesque, monstrous, or in terms of socio-sexual irrelevancy. Boucher articulates Lewis's response to this stage of aging through his menopausal figures who enact of a form of marginalized femininity. The menopausal women of the text, she argues, are constructed through cultural perception as much as they are determined by their biology (the loss of their reproductive capacity), and through specifically male-dominated discourses. Boucher emphasizes the importance of embodiment in the study of age; like Melanie Zynel and Leah Grisham, she is particularly sensitive to the way that the aging female body finds expression through (or, in this case, is largely determined by) modes of illness, fragility, and disability.

Leah Grisham's essay takes as its focus Dickens's *Dombey and Son* and Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, two novels which she argues situate women in advanced stages of the life course alongside discourses which envision orientalized or Eastern otherness as grotesque. In their old age, she contends, both women are othered, as their alignment with the dangerous figure of Cleopatra places them in a doubly-unfamiliar position as somehow "foreign". Old age, she illustrates, possesses in these texts the same capacity to alienate and ostracize as does

race and nation. In their disavowal of popular Victorian ideologies of femininity which associated women with the domestic sphere, these mercenary, immoral, manipulative women are vilified as a threat to social order – which is exacerbated by their age. Like the menopausal women examined in Boucher's article, refusal to maintain their proper place (secluded within the home) leads these women to be figured as deviant and disruptive in terms of both age and gender.

Several articles here address the issue of age identity when it is experienced in opposition with linear, calendrical age (feeling out of step with cultural and social expectations across the age spectrum), and Jonathon Shears explores a similar disjunction. However, rather than examining what happens when processes of growing old are resisted, or "appropriate" behavior according to old age is rejected, Shears focuses on Lord Byron who, he claims, was prematurely aged. His analysis is of fractured age-conformity and experience, but with a difference. Byron, he shows, experienced an inflated sense of agedness even as a young man. The analysis of particular examples from the poet's work, together with relevant auto/biographical sources provides a thoughtful reading of Byron's attitude towards his own premature aging. Shears illustrates how this consciousness of being out of step with his chronological age is reflected in both his published work and in his own sense of personal decline (in appearance and creative ability). Byron, it is revealed cultivated a "premature late style". The article draws attention to Byron's contradictory attitude towards his own aging process, together with resentment towards external accusations of premature aging that were related to his dissipated youth. A clear moral sense of accountability in Byron's discussions of age-related experience and identity emerges, while Shears simultaneously observes that Byron also disavows personal responsibility by cultivating a fatalistic attitude towards age and mortality. The experience of age, Shears demonstrates, has a significant impact on Byron's masculinity.

Many of the essays are concerned with what constituted appropriate behavior at any given age during the period. Such ideologies of age-appropriate conduct are not monolithic, as Marta Miquel-Baldellou argues in her analysis of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novel *The Caxtons*. With an emphasis on conduct, drawn in part from relevant biographical detail and nineteenth-century advice manuals and the Smilesean ethic of self-help, Miquel-Baldellou traces Bulwer-Lytton's construction of contradictory and competing masculinities. In her reading of the text, she highlights the novel's articulation of anxieties over effeminacy and emasculation, as well as raising for attention the models of vigorous, active manliness in counterpoint. Doing so provides a fascinating account of opposing discourses of masculinity in the novel as various characters are established as different types of masculinity for male youth to emulate or reject. Miquel-Baldellou explores the impact of a number of discourses that informed idealized masculinity at the time, citing the influence of muscular Chistianity, the association of virility with imperialist values, and the moral capacity of work. In articulating discrete types of manliness, however, Miquel-Baldellou reveals in Bulwer-Lytton's novel a divergence between a prized, rugged, active masculinity associated with youth, and older, traditional masculinity, typified by a loss of power and agency. Age and gender are therefore often mutually constituted.

While several of the essays in this volume demonstrate how, in the nineteenth century, narratives of decline and decay associated with aging might be resisted or at the very least problematized, both Shears's article and Marta Miquel-Baldellou's engage in reading aging masculinity as a source of fascination and quasi-celebration. In dealing with the work of Byron and Bulwer-Lytton respectively, both Shears's and Miquel-Baldellou's essays examine figures that incline towards agedness, rather than resisting the passage into later stages of the life course. My own essay engages in a close analysis of both resistance to aging, and a desire for accelerated aging, within a brief fragment of experimental text by George Meredith, "The

Gentleman of Fifty and the Damsel of Nineteen". Age-identity, I suggest, emerges clearly as a consciously-constructed, synthetic experience of (often failed) conformity to cultural norms and expectations related to one's chronological stage of life. These assumptions are manifest in the work of George Meredith. However, I argue that evident anxieties about complying with such culturally-determined strictures of age-appropriate behavior do more to question the efficacy – and even the practicality – of internalizing and seeking to perpetuate the sensibilities, conduct, values, and mode of living generally accorded to a particular age group. In examining these presumed passports associated with life-course stages, Meredith's writing largely undermines sets of cultural assumptions which align the experience of age with preconceived attitudes, ideas, behaviors, and physicalities. He proposes an especially fluid vision of the life course, and also unpacks the ways in which disparity in age is assumed to create a barrier in relationships. His fiction suggests that it possesses significance as a part of the constant dialogue enacted between interior self and external culture. This dialogue is often part of the framework inhabited by his fictional characters, whose awareness of and sensitivity to their age typically inflects their perceptions of themselves and also those around them – whether they resist or adhere to dominant typologies of aging. For Meredith, I argue, age and aging are sites of both cultural conformity and singularity.

The final essay in the volume moves away from literary criticism to consider, from cultural-studies and sociological perspectives, discrepancies in longevity between men and women. Margaret Morganroth Gullette examines largely male responses from Britain and America to the evidence that, at the fin de siècle, women were living longer than men (giving rise to apparent male discomfort and dissatisfaction). Gullette's article establishes the ways in which narratives of longevity in the period were constructed, and analyzes incongruities in the historical interpretation of such data, thereby reinterpreting a diverse range of records and statistics. Gullette demonstrates the complex politics of aging and considering the life span

across the gender divide. Her revised interpretation of the data on which she draws shows that, in terms of life expectancy and on the question of longevity at the end of the nineteenth century, assumptions that women were comparatively weak and men were superior required significant revision. In doing so, her article illustrates, a greater focus emerged on women's extended midlife.

This special issue of *NCGS* enhances understanding about aging as both process and experience throughout the nineteenth century, as well as expanding critical understanding of how age signified in the period. A number of essays here isolate the ways in which old age in particular experienced a cultural devaluation (which continues today), especially in conjunction with the idealization of youth from the Romantic period to the fin de siècle. However, the notion of age as decline is also problematized. Several of the essays here focus on old age as a particularly liminal category of type of experience (often characterized by social disenfranchisement, physical and sexual decline, waning intellect or limited cultural value), although this stance is interrogated by many of the articles. As well as engaging with the issue of old age as it relates to corporeality, perceptions of generational difference, accounts of illness and health, political developments, life expectancy, and cultural indices of old age, these articles also interrogate aging as a mode of consciousness and interior self-awareness. As Karen Chase has observed, in the nineteenth century there was "a tendency of individuals to look more intimately at their ongoing experience of aging, to mark it and to weigh it, and to make it a theme of self-understanding, even from a relatively young age" (276). However, as well as old age, adolescence and midlife also feature here as concrete stages of life which impact clearly on social interaction, participation, and individuals' sense of self. These articles also focus on age through a lens of gendered experience, to illustrate the distinctions of male and female age grading, and to reflect on the impact of cultural perceptions about the ways that age and gender intersect. Age itself is dynamic, and individual and social responses to age and

aging shift across the chronological spectrum. The work in this special issue illustrate that, as well as gender, age informs identity construction as an often crucial determining factor, although how it signifies is necessarily fluid and labile.

Works Cited

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[i] The title "Age Studies Comes of Age" was used for the Editors' Column in the first issue of the online journal *Age Culture Humanities* (2014). http://ageculturehumanities.org/WP/from-the-editors/.
[ii] In fact, two of my colleagues, Siân Adiseshiah and Amy Culley, also work in this field.
[iii] The module descriptor for "Growing Up and Growing Old" succeeded in sufficiently piquing students' interest in this area of literary study: I am delighted and encouraged to see that the module was fully subscribed.
[iv] The journal *Age Culture Humanities*, established in 2014, recognizes this and provides a crucial forum for interdisciplinary work across the humanities focusing on age and aging. The editors' decision to accept a special issue of *Nineteenth Century Gender Studies* on "Age and Gender", and the inclusion of "age" as a component of the journal's remit (following Margaret Morganroth Gullette's suggestion, made while this issue has been in preparation) also signifies the fact that this journal also provides a forum which welcomes specifically research engaged in the study of age and aging in the fields of literature, art, and cultural studies.